

# Symbols of the Great Seal

When the first Seal was cast in 1782, it was a modest 2 5/16" in diameter. Its base was sturdy iron or steel and its engraved surface a softer brass. Some small imperfections occurred, yet every aspect of this new Seal represented the ideals that our Founding Fathers upheld—unity, independence, strength, fortitude and virtue.

The Seal shares symbolism with the American flag. The white stripes in both signify purity and innocence; the red, hardiness and valor. The blue field for the flag's stars and the blue bar across the shield both represent vigilance, perseverance and justice.

## CHARLES THOMSON'S BLAZON OR DESCRIPTION OF THE GREAT SEAL

That the Device for an Armorial Achievement & Reverse of the great seal for the United States in Congress assembled is as follows.—

### Arms

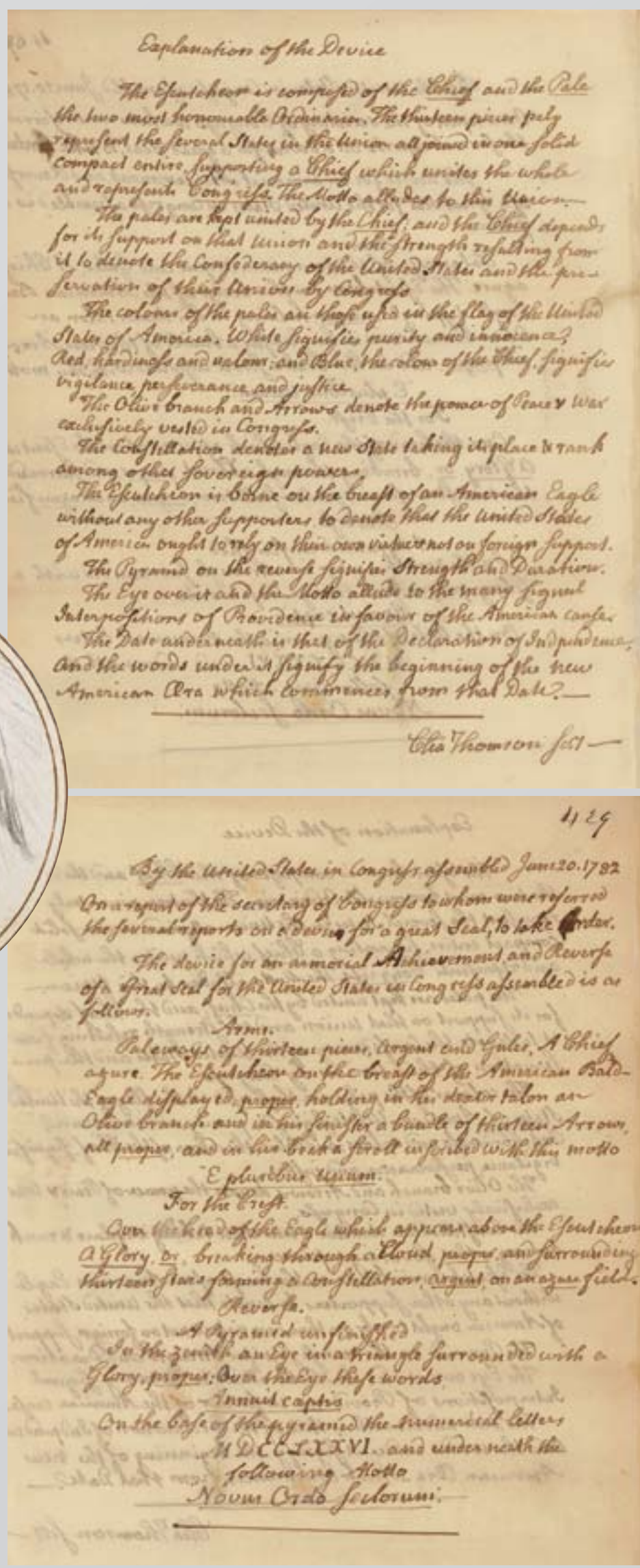
Paleways of thirteen pieces Argent and Gules: a Chief, Azure. The Escutcheon on the breast of the American bald Eagle displayed, proper, holding in his dexter talon an Olive branch, and in his sinister a bundle of thirteen arrows, all proper, & in his beak a scroll, inscribed with this Motto. 'E pluribus unum'.—

### For the Crest

Over the head of the Eagle which appears above the Escutcheon, A Glory, Or, breaking through a cloud, proper, & surrounding thirteen stars forming a Constellation, Argent, on an Azure field.—

### Reverse

A Pyramid unfinished. In the Zenith an Eye in a triangle surrounded with a glory proper. Over the Eye these words 'Annuit Coeptis'. On the base of the pyramid the numerical letters MDCCLXXVI & underneath the following motto. 'novus ordo seclorum'



Copy of the Continental Congress' 1782 report on the Great Seal. Courtesy of the National Archives.

## THE EAGLE OR THE TURKEY: BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S THOUGHTS ON THE NATIONAL BIRD

Popular culture portrays Benjamin Franklin ardently opposing the eagle as the national emblem. How much truth is there to this story?

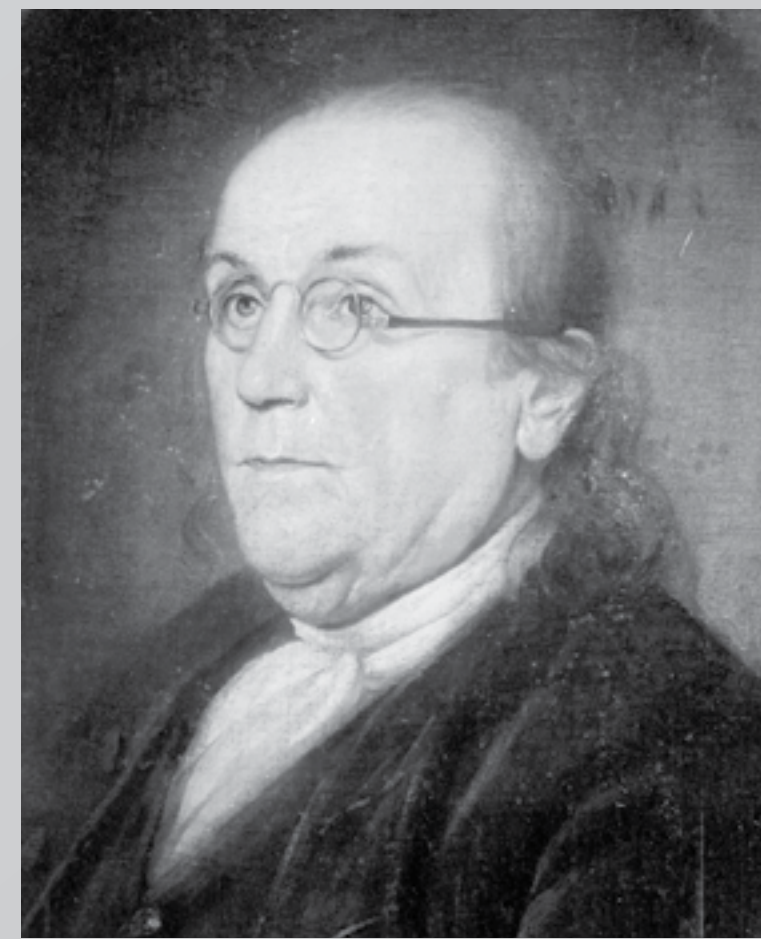
Was Franklin in Philadelphia protesting the eagle during the 1782 vote on the Seal? No, he was Minister to France at the time, negotiating the treaty to end the war with England.

Did he complain to the Congress afterwards about the eagle? If so, we have no record of it.

Did he ever object publicly to the eagle? Again, no evidence today. This is what we do know:



In 1784, Franklin wrote a humorous letter from France to his daughter, Sarah Bache, above, stating he wished "the bald eagle had not been chosen as the Representative of our Country."



In the letter, Franklin was humorously rebuking critics that the eagle resembled the turkey on the national emblem. He felt the detractors should not complain, since for him the turkey was a far more "respectable Bird."



For Franklin, the bald eagle did not "get his living honestly," being "too lazy to fish for himself" and was easily chased away by smaller birds. He also observed, "Eagles have been found in all Countries."



Franklin called the turkey a bird of courage and a "true original Native of America." Even so, he admitted it was a little "vain and silly."



No birds appeared in the image of Moses crossing the Red Sea that Franklin proposed for the reverse of the Great Seal while on the First Committee to design the Seal.

Artist Anatole Kovarsky created a cover for the *New Yorker's* November 24, 1962 Thanksgiving issue that humorously illustrated Benjamin Franklin's preference for the turkey as our national bird. Kovarsky's drawing can be found at: <<http://www.cartoonbank.com>>.

Papers of the Continental Congress, item 23, R.G. 360, folio 113



### Glory or Constellation of Stars

symbolizes a new nation taking its place among other sovereign states.

### Bald Eagle

stands for courage, strength, alertness, and nobility. Its open wings, with tips up (a position called "displayed") signify protection.

### Shield or Escutcheon

as a whole represents the nation. The stripes symbolize the states united under a blue bar representing Congress. The unsupported shield reflects the value of the U.S. standing alone on its own virtue.

### Olive Branch

has for millennia stood for peace and harmony. With the arrows, the olive branch denotes the powers of peace and war.

### E Pluribus Unum

means "out of many, one," and reflects the many individuals and colonies that form the United States.

### The Number 13

denotes the 13 original states. The arrows, stripes in the shield and stars in the constellation are also 13 in number.

### Arrows

are an ancient symbol of readiness for battle. With the olive branch, the arrows denote the powers of peace and war.

### Red, White, and Blue

are the colors of the American flag. White stands for purity and innocence; red for hardiness and valor; and blue for vigilance, perseverance and justice.



### Eye of Providence

appears on the highest point of the pyramid, with rays of glory surrounding it. The designers did not specify a right or left eye. The pyramid signifies strength and duration.

### 13 Step Pyramid

signifies strength and duration. Traditionally drawn with thirteen levels, but no particular number was specified in the original design.

### The motto ANNUIT COEPTIS

means "Providence favors (or has favored) our undertakings." The eye alludes to the many interventions of providence that Founding Fathers perceived to have favored the American cause.

### The motto NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM

and Date, literally mean "A new order of the ages," but referred to the beginning of a New American era. The date, 1776 in Roman numerals, refers to the year of the Declaration, when the new American era began.

All parts of the Seal design, from eagle and shield to pyramid and mottoes, held distinct meanings for the founders of our nation.